

Horror in Iraq Emor 2004

As a rabbi, each week I explore the torah portion for meaning. There are times when one plows through the parasha in search of some eternal message to share with the congregation. There are times when one looks for an insight to shed light upon things happening in our world. And sometimes a rabbi buries oneself in the parasha precisely to avoid and escape any kind of connection to events around us. In many respects, I am tempted to choose the latter option today.

Who among us was not appalled by the images of American soldiers mocking, tormenting and torturing Iraqi prisoners. In an effort to make sense of these unjustifiable acts of humiliation, we have heard three primary responses. We have been told it was necessary to extract information from the captives. We have also heard that the soldiers were inadequately trained. And we have been correctly reminded of the fact that the overwhelming number of American men and women serving in the armed forces in Iraq are not guilty of such conduct. The President has apologized and expressed his personal disgust and outrage, and the Congress has launched a full scale investigation and hearing into the abuses.

So, tempted as I am not to comment on these events, it is hard to ignore them, and moreover, precisely when an issue of such blatant immorality becomes the focus of attention of our entire nation and the world, it is incumbent upon religious leaders to offer insights.

The prayer for our nation, which asks for blessings for our leaders implores God to, "Teach them insights of your Torah, that they may administer all affairs of state fairly....", words which mean that the wisdom of our sages can and should be shared with all and that torah can and should influence the actions of a just government and people.

First and foremost, it is important to remind people that the true mark of a society is not how its most abhorrent individuals act. Every group has its extremists. The true measure of a society, however, is how it reacts to those individuals. How these kinds of acts are dealt with by the authorities, and how they are viewed by the majority reveal the values of that society.

In this, at least, we can take comfort in the overwhelming disgust and repulsion of the American people and the American government to the scenes coming out of the Al Gahrib prison. The part I find most frustrating about all this is that this may come to symbolize America, when we know that these acts do not typify or represent our nation or our values.

Moreover, at times like these it is important for us to turn to the wisdom of our ancient tradition for guidance, for what we have witnessed certainly does not represent the values of Judaism. A number of laws in the torah are devoted specifically to the subject of how to treat others in times of war. An entire parasha opens with the words, and is called *Kee*

taytze – “when you go out...,” and it is not referring to when you go out to buy a loaf of bread, but rather -- when you go out to war.

2,000 years ago the Talmud developed an entire ethos called, *tohar neshek*, purity of arms, which was among the first, and certainly remains among the most enlightened and sophisticated set of rules pertaining to how one may and may not treat an enemy combatant. It, incidentally, is the foundation and guiding principle of the Israel Defense Forces.

I know that the US Army is not going to adopt the concept of *tohar neshek* into its code of conduct. Yet nevertheless, there are three basic teachings of Judaism which I wish we could pass on to the front lines. Since word might not reach the soldiers in Iraq, or for that matter, even West Point, and barring the unlikely prospect that I will be invited to speak there as a guest lecturer, I hope these three simple teachings will have an impact on those of us here today, and that you will carry them with you.

The story of creation asserts that each and every one of us is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. This means that everyone, including the strangers and the most unfortunate among us, is really no different. We are implored to treat all people with dignity and respect, for each carries within a spark of the Divine. All too often, too many religions are concerned with how to appease God. Judaism asserts that the way to show respect for God is by treating His creatures with respect.

The next teaching we should take to heart, is a corollary to the first. Over the ark of many synagogues are the words, *Da lifnei mee atah omed*: Know before whom you stand. We should constantly live our lives with the knowledge that God is always present, wherever we may be. I know people who take this passage and live in constant fear. But this is not what our sages wanted. Rather, they imparted these words to us, so that we would know that we should always strive to be our best, and to live our lives so that the Almighty would not be disappointed by our efforts and aspirations.

Finally, the most frequently repeated passage in the torah is the injunction, Remember you were strangers in the land of Egypt. More than just the message of Passover, it becomes the overriding moral imperative as to how we are to treat others. As a result of our experience with slavery, oppression and alienation, we are commanded to have compassion for others and to be the advocate for the disadvantaged.

Can you imagine if the soldiers and officers stationed in Iraq were equipped with these three basic concepts, passages which are meant to govern our lives as Jews. The embarrassment would surely have been avoided.

But the real challenge and question is – how do we as Jews incorporate these teachings into our lives. How can we live a life guided by the noble ethics developed by our sages. Herein we find that part of the answer is given in this week's torah reading. In describing the holidays and festivals we are commanded to observe, we are given the tools to preserve our tradition and its teachings.

All the noble concepts in the world are meaningless unless we have a structure in place to ensure that they live on. This framework is found in our daily lives, and the rhythm of the holidays and the sabbath. They contain the very DNA of our faith, and this is why it is so important to observe and preserve them. The laws and holidays are integrated together. As we read in the haftarah of Ezekiel, *“et toratai v’et hukotai bechol moadai... , they shall keep my laws and statutes in all my appointed seasons and hallow my Sabbaths.”*

Some of you may know the story about the couple who have been married 45 years. They get on the phone and call each of their children around the country, telling them they must come home right away because they are thinking about getting a divorce. Frantically, on the other end of the line, their children respond, “Ma, Dad, don’t do anything. Wait until we can get there. Then we can talk this over, and try to work things out.” Relieved, the husband hangs up the phone, turns to his wife, and says, “OK, Shirley. We got them to come home for Rosh Hashanah, now we have to figure out how to get them here for Pesah!”

Observing the Jewish holidays are central to preserving the family. But even more than that, they contain the essential messages of Judaism. On Rosh Hashana we are reminded of the dignity of humanity, which culminates in the importance of healing and forgiveness through teshuvah on Yom Kippur. Sukkot teaches us of the importance of gratitude and journeys, and culminates in the joyous celebration of Torah. On Pesah, we celebrate freedom and the birth of a nation, culminating in the holiday of Shavuot, which asserts the centrality of mitzvot in our lives. Throughout all the days we affirm that we stood at Mt. Sinai and accepted the calling to be a holy people, entering into an eternal covenant with the Almighty. Through the holidays we tell our story, which is why we add to the calendar, days such as Yom HaShoah and Yom HaAtzmaut.

A story is told about a gypsy and a Jew who were on their way to their deaths during World War II, both victims of Nazi cruelty. Noting their common fate the gypsy turned to the Jew and said, “We shall both perish, but there is one difference. My death will be forgotten, but your people will always remember yours.”

That is the essential message. Through observance of our holidays, through study of torah, through worship, we are given the tools of remembering and of telling our story. And let us never forget that the heart of the message of our eternal heritage is the powerful message of remembering that every human being is created in the image of God. May we always act in a manner so that how we act will not bring shame upon us, and so that God will always be proud of our deeds.

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B’nai Tzedek
Potomac, MD
May 8, 2004